

Mammal and Birding trip to Panama - 3rd to 12th November 2019

([Tamarin Tour: Mammal and Birding Adventure](#) with Canopy Tower)

Trip report by Steph Elliott & Dave Jones

Summary

26 species mammals (25 lifers), plus 3 UID; 238 species birds (183 SE / 178 DJ lifers) plus 11 reptiles and 6 amphibians.

Logistics

Being time poor AND money poor! - we are continually on the lookout for good value ways of seeing new and exciting wildlife. The Canopy Tower Tamarin Tour offered good value - lots of potential for mammals new to us, plus neotropical birding. We assess our potential holidays on £ per lifer, with a 10x weighting for new mammals! We did also look at some other options e.g Naturetrek and doing something similar ourselves with a bit of guiding but this tour seemed to offer the best bang for our limited bucks.

We booked the Tour directly with Canopy Tower through their web-site. Once your enquiry is picked up, you correspond with the same person each time you get in touch, which was useful. We went in November partly because of the 'Green Season' lower cost, and because it is a good time for us to get away from work. They initially tried to sell us the more expensive suites, but we insisted on the basic accommodation.

Flights to Panama were booked by us through Expedia. We flew from Inverness to Heathrow, then Heathrow to Madrid. We stayed overnight at a hotel near to the airport at Madrid, and then flew from Madrid to Panama City the following morning. The flight was not full, but we seemed to be surrounded by a large family of uncontrolled children who variously occupied the seats over 3 rows for much of the flight! Other than that, the flight was comfortable. On the return trip, we transited via Miami because that meant we would connect with an earlier flight back to Inverness cutting several hours off the journey time. On the negative side, we had to transit through a super-busy US airport, and travelling through the US is always more stressful than it needs to be, so we avoid it when we can.

The Tamarin Tour is basically a combination of Canopy's daily guided birding trips that are best for mammals, with a bit of extra effort to seek the mammals out. If you did these excursions as a birder, they probably wouldn't bother finding some of the bats for you, for example. This was ideal for us as we are interested in pretty much everything, but it might not suit everyone. Which guides and guests are with you each day depends on which excursions folks have booked onto. We overlapped with someone else doing the Tamarin Tour for a few days. Even though we were going on a guided tour, we did quite a bit of research on what mammals are seen at the locations we were going to be taken to, so that we knew what to expect and what to make effort for ourselves (e.g. Spectral Bat).

Days follow the rough pattern of pre-breakfast birding (serenaded by Howler Monkeys) with one of the guides on at the top of the Tower (coffee provided!), then out for the morning activity. Return for lunch and a bit of free time, then out for the afternoon activity. Dinner and then either the organised spotlighting, or do you own from the Tower.

Pretty much everything was included in the Tamarin Tour price - all transfers to/from the airport and between accommodation locations, daily guiding, meals and teas/coffees available most of the time. Three night drives or walks at Canopy Tower and one night walk at Canopy Lodge are also included. The food is excellent (but different) at both Canopy Tower and Canopy Lodge. The accommodation is more basic but very comfortable at the Tower, but positively luxurious at the Lodge!

Itinerary

Sun 03 Nov 19	arrival into Panama Toumen International Airport. Transfer to Canopy Tower. Overnight Canopy Tower
Mon 04 Nov 19	Dawn on Observation Deck. Morning walk down Semaphore Hill. Afternoon Gamboa Marina and Rainforest Resort grounds. Night walk Semaphore Hill. Overnight Canopy Tower
Tue 05 Nov 19	Dawn on Obs Deck. Morning Pipeline Road. Afternoon Old Gamboa Road. Overnight Canopy Tower
Wed 06 Nov 19	Dawn on Obs Deck. Full day tour to San Lorenzo & Fort Sherman. Overnight Canopy Tower.
Thu 07 Nov 19	Dawn on Obs Deck. Morning at Pipeline Road (2nd section). Afternoon Sloth Rescue Centre & Gamboa Rainforest Resort. Night drive on Semaphore Hill & Gamboa Town. Overnight Canopy Tower
Fri 08 Nov 19	Dawn on Obs Deck. Morning boat trip Gatun Lake & Panama Canal. Afternoon at Rainforest Discovery Centre. Night drive Semaphore Hill. Overnight Canopy Tower
Sat 09 Nov 19	Morning at Metropolitan Park & Punta Culebra. Afternoon Semaphore Hill. Overnight Canopy Tower
Sun 10 Nov 19	Dawn on Obs Deck. Morning transfer to Canopy Lodge. Afternoon Chorro El Macho trail and La Mesa Road. Night walk Chorro El Macho and Canopy Lodge grounds. Overnight Canopy Lodge
Mon 11 Nov 19	Dawn Canopy Lodge grounds. Morning La Mesa cultivations and Candelario trail. Afternoon Valle Chiquito and Altos del Maria. Overnight Canopy Lodge
Tue 12 Nov 19	Dawn Canopy Lodge grounds. Transfer to Panama Tocumen airport & flights home.

Diary

Sun 03 Nov 2019

We arrived into Panama Tocumen International Airport at c.16:15 hours, went through immigration etc and then waited for our luggage, which never seemed to appear. After checking every single belt in arrivals, we eventually found our bags on a belt completely unrelated to our flight. One of the drivers from Canopy Tower was waiting for us, and wondered where we had been! We saw a few birds on the minibus transfer. At the Tower we were greeted by Danilo Jnr who was to be our guide the following day & he explained the itinerary (and most importantly, what time we needed to be at breakfast!)

After dinner, we could see someone else's spotlight in the trees outside our room, and caught a glimpse of a fairly large mammal moving through the trees. From size and shape it was probably a kinkajou, but we just didn't get enough on it, to be certain. One that got away...

Mon 04 Nov 2019

By 05:30 dawn was beginning to break, and by 05:40 the **Mantled Howler Monkeys** were, um, howling! We saw a few birds from our window (which overlooked the hummingbird feeder tree) and then went up to the upper viewing deck for pre-brekkie birding. Lots of new birds and our first **Brown-throated (three-toed) Sloth** were present. A mammal lifer before breakfast!

This morning was spent on Semaphore Hill, the paved track which leads from the main road uphill to Canopy Tower. We were joined by 4 Americans and 2 Brits, all on birding trips. I think this was the most people per guide we had all trip. Mammals seen were **White-nosed Coati**, **Red-tailed Squirrel** and **Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth**, and we saw 4 **Central American Agouti** during the course of the walk. A monkey heard crashing through the trees was probably Mantled Howler, but we didn't see it. Butterflies were everywhere, a few herps spotted (e.g. Yellow-headed Gecko) and *Tetragonisca angustula*, a small, sting-less eusocial bee, building a wax pot on the upper surface of a bridge parapet!

When we got to the bottom of the track, the guide showed us the **Greater White-lined Bats** (at least 3) roosting under the bridge. One of the open-backed seated trucks magically appeared & drove us back up the hill in time for lunch.

The afternoon was spent around the Gamboa marina & the Rainforest Resort, for waterbird birding. Plenty of **Central American Agouti** pottering about. Danilo took us to a tree to see **Common Tent-making Bats** roosting under the fronds of a palm.

On our return up Semaphore Hill we saw a group of 12 **Mantled Howler Monkey**, and as the light was beginning to fade a small bat was seen flitting around the compound - probably **Pallas's Mastiff Bat**.

After dinner was the first of our night drives / walks. No-one else had booked a night walk tonight so it was just us with guide Danilo Jnr so we decided to walk. The first mammal spotlighted was a **Central American Woolly Opossum** high up in the canopy. We continued further down the hill, until Danilo suddenly stopped - he'd found a **Rothschild's Porcupine** tucked in a tree hole! We also saw two **Hoffman's Two-toed Sloths**, and saw Mottled Owl & Black-and-White Owl. A successful night.



Central American Woolly Opossum

Tues 05 Nov

Once again we awoke to the sound of Mantled Howler Monkeys - no need for an alarm clock! Along with the pre-breakfast birding, we saw **White-nosed Coati** from our bedroom window, and then the local group of **Geoffroy's Tamarin** turned up in the "Tamarin Tree" (a Ceropia) outside the dining room window, giving us some cracking views including some dinky young.

This morning was spent birding the first section of the famous Pipeline Road with Danilo Jnr. We were accompanied by the sounds of **Mantled Howlers**. A **Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth** was seen, as well as **Central American Agouti** and a **White-nosed Coati** which Steph videoed. No new mammals, but loads of bird lifers.

In the afternoon we birded the Old Gamboa Road near to the canal, which is a good spot for picking up a few waterbirds that are scarce elsewhere. Again we were accompanied by the sound of **Mantled Howlers**, and saw some too.

Having read in other trips reports about Spectral Bat sometimes being seen around the top of the tower, once we'd freshened up we decided to sit out on the upper deck as it got dark before dinner. We sat on the seats with our backs to the tower looking outwards. Just as the light was dropping (c.18:08hrs) an enormous bat (and I mean BIG) started flying past us several times. It could only be the **Spectral Bat!** It flew past us a few times and then either flew off or it was too dark for us to see. We also saw a few **Pallas's Mastiff Bats** again.

Wed 06 Nov

Usual **Mantled Howler** alarm clock. By now we were in the routine of getting onto the platform as early as possible (the guide agrees a meeting time, but the hatch isn't locked so you can go up when you want). This morning, however, we were greeted on the staircase to the dining room by a **Central American Woolly**

Opossum. I don't know who was more surprised to see whom! There was a small bat sp. flying around the dining room (probably again **Pallas's Mastiff** which apparently frequently make their way through the large open dining room windows).

Today was a full day trip out to San Lorenzo and Fort Sherman, with guide Jorge and us, plus another guest doing the Tamarin Tour. En route we saw the ubiquitous **Central American Agouti**. In Colon itself, we saw a group of 8 **Mantled Howlers**, and a dead **Central American Woolly Opossum** on the road. At various times in the day we saw more **Mantled Howlers**, **Hoffman's Two-toed Sloths** and also **White-nosed Coatis**. At one point we seemed to come across two different troops of howlers having a bit of a territorial ding-dong - they were really going for it. One of the main targets for the day was the **Panamanian White-throated Capuchins**, which we saw but with poor views. We photographed an armadillo burrow, and saw a **Red-tailed Squirrel**.

The picnic lunch, complete with tables, chairs and tablecloths was had at Fuerte San Lorenzo on the Carribean coast. After lunch we explored the fort a bit, and Jorge took us into some of the lower down, darker chambers for roosting bats. We found seven **Common Big-eared Bats** and one **Seba's Short-tailed Bat** - our fifth and sixth bat species of the trip.



Posh Picnic!

More birding in the afternoon was interrupted by a family group of eleven **White-nosed Coati**, seemingly oblivious to our presence! Before leaving the area, we spent some time at a bridge overlooking some mangroves in the hope of a Crab-eating Raccoon but we were unsuccessful.

Back at Canopy Tower, we saw a **Brown-throated Sloth** and **Pallas's Mastiff Bats** from the upper deck before dinner.

Thu 07 Nov

It was misty today, so we were up before the Howlers! The **Brown-throated Sloth** was in the same tree we'd seen it in last night.

Today was birding the Pipeline Road again, this time the second section. We made an early morning stop at the Ammo Ponds on the way, in hope of Lesser Capybara but no doing. Jorge hoped we might catch a glimpse of a Tayra that had been seen on this section recently, but we didn't see that either, just the usual howlers, agouti and coati. Lots of really good bird lifers and some nice reptiles too.

Back at Canopy Tower for lunch, the **Geoffroy's Tamarin** were back in the Tamarin Tree, eating bananas that the kitchen staff had put out for them (there is a clever pulley system to deliver the bananas), and the **Brown-throated Sloth** was still in the same spot as this morning.



Geoffroy's Tamarin

After lunch, we were dropped off at a sloth rescue centre / butterfly collection / frog collection at the Gamboa Resort, which to be fair is on the tour itinerary even though we don't understand why - we'd rather have been trying to find real wildlife! We did, however, see a (wild) **Variegated Squirrel** here - our first of the trip. Anyway, once we'd endured that, we were met by Jorge who took us to various spots around the Gamboa resort. We got much better views of a group of 15 **Panamanian White-throated Capuchins**, and near a cable-car station there was a **Rufous Tree-rat** in a tree hole - our 18th mammal lifer of the trip. We had another try at Ammo Ponds on the way back, but still no capybara...

After dinner, we had the second of the included night / spotlighting sessions. This time it was a drive down Semaphore Hill, and then along the main road to Gamboa town and back. On the way down the hill there was a **Brown-throated Sloth**, and at the bottom of the hill Jorge spotted a Northern Tamadua, but none of the group got on it. Along the main road, Jorge spotted a **Lesser Capybara** (our only one of the trip) in the roadside vegetation which we all got good views of. Common Pauraque were hawking about near Gamboa. On the return journey back up the hill a **Nine-banded Armadillo** crossed the road.

When we got back to Canopy Tower, on our way to our room we surprised a **Central American Woolly Opossum** on the stairs to the dining room again! It scampered upstairs into the dining room, so we of course followed. It gave itself away, making small noises and using a torch we found it on a girder above head height, where we photographed it.

Fri 08 Nov

Usual routine of Mantled Howler alarm and pre-breakfast birding out on deck. Today we were going on a boat trip on the Panama Canal and Gatun Lake. The mammal highlight of this boat trip was being taken to some **Proboscis Bats**, about 13 of them roosting on a tree overhanging the lake. The lowlight was probably seeing the very habituated **Panamanian White-throated Capuchins** and **Geoffroy's Tamarins** scampering towards, and in some cases getting on board, the tourist boats. They clearly get fed often.



Proboscis Bats

The afternoon was spent at and around the Panama Rainforest Discovery Centre (near Pipeline Road). After watching an assortment of stunning hummingbirds on the feeders at the centre, we went underneath the deck to see some more roosting bats - **Pallas's Mastiff Bats** and **Seba's Short-tailed Bats**. We also climbed a tower in the forest for some birding, and saw a **Lesser White-lined Bat** roosting there.

After dinner we had the third of our included Night Drives at Canopy Tower. We saw **Central American Woolly Opossum**, **Hoffman's Two-toed** and **Brown-throated Sloth** on the drive down the hill. On the drive back up the hill we were all surprised (including the guide Jorge!) to see a **Spotted Paca** crossing the road. Apparently they very rarely see them. Lucky us!

Sat 09 Nov

This morning was to be spent at a couple of sites close to Panama City, so we had an earlier departure from the tower in order to be at Metropolitan Park whilst the birds were still active. In Metro Park, as well as some

really good birds, we saw a small group of **Geoffroy's Tamarins**, a pale-grey coloured **Variegated Squirrel** and of course **Brown-throated Sloth** and **Central American Agouti**.

However, for the mammal watcher the main target today was Crab-eating Raccoon, so off to Punta Culebra we went. After a bit of searching, we found a **Crab-eating Raccoon** resting and grooming in the fork of a tree near the end of the peninsula. Lovely!



Crab-eating Raccoon

In the afternoon, we declined the scheduled trip to the Miraflores Locks on the canal, preferring to have a self-guided wander along Semaphore Hill. We might have been better off at the Locks! We got caught out in the heaviest rain of the holiday so far, we got drenched and Steph's camera gave up the ghost after getting water-logged. Jorge, who had taken another guest birding, found us huddled under a tree and gave us a very welcome lift back up the hill in the truck.

Dinner was accompanied by a small bat, probably **Pallas's Mastiff**, flying around the dining room. The staff turn off the fans when the bats come in so they don't fly into them.

Sun 10 Nov

Pre-breakfast birding, and then off on the 2.5 hour transfer from Canopy Tower to Canopy Lodge in Valle de Anton for the last couple of nights of the Tour. It rained most of the way and we didn't see very much.

Meals at Canopy Lodge are in a covered open-air dining room, near to the YouTube Fruit Feeder Cam bird table! What you don't see on YouTube is all the goings-on beneath the table, including the **Agoutis** taking advantage of what falls off!

The general feel of the environment around Canopy Lodge is very different, and there are fewer mammals here which is why (we were told) there are only two nights here on the Tamarin Tour. No being woken by the Howler Monkey alarm clock.

In the afternoon, we had a guided walk with Danilo Snr up to La Mesa. Lots of new birds, which we had not seen at Canopy Tower, but, for the first time, no mammals on this excursion.

However, after dinner, Danilo Snr got the spotlight out and we got another new mammal for the trip, when a **Black-eared Opossum** visited the bird table in the dark to get the birds' leftovers.

After dinner was our last night excursion - this time a night walk with Danilo Snr. We walked the trails around the waterfall area of Chorro Macho, the adjacent road and around some of the grounds of the Lodge. Firstly, we found a **Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth**. Later on the walk we had absolutely stunning views of a **Rothschild's Porcupine** sitting high up in a tree with its fleshy nose and prehensile tail all clearly visible. Shame Steph's camera still wasn't working after getting water-logged... Two **Black-eared Opossum** were in the scrub above the Lodge's compost pit, and Danilo pointed out some nice frogs to us too.

After Danilo had left us for the night, we then went to sit on the chairs overlooking the hummingbird nectar feeders, and watched the **Orange Nectar Bats** coming in for a free meal. They weren't that keen on torchlight, but even by the ambient light of the dining room behind us it was possible to see the orange pelage as well as observe them feeding from the feeders.

We also spotlighted a rat species on the bird table, but weren't able to get photos. We wondered if it might be Watson's Climbing Rat. When we asked Danilo Snr about it in the morning, he also had some video footage of a similar-looking rat on the bird table which he said was Watson's Climbing Rat. A rat species is also seen quite regularly on the YouTube stream, which is probably also the same.

Mon 11 Nov

After watching the bird table before breakfast (**Central American Agouti, Red-tailed Squirrel**), we were off for the morning's birding with Danilo Snr to the La Mesa cultivations and the Candelario trail. The first mammal of this excursion was a **Brown-throated Sloth** high up in a tree in the cultivations, being mobbed by black-chested jays which it obviously couldn't escape from (being a sloth!). Having birded our way through the cultivations, it was into the scrubby woodland of the Candelario trail. Almost immediately, we saw a **Red-tailed Squirrel**, and later on had a **Rufous Tree-rat** in a tree hole - our second of the trip.



Rufous Tree-rat

We returned to the Lodge for lunch, by now the cloud cover was looking quite ominous. After lunch, we headed out with another guide Moyo to bird at a higher altitude in the Altos Maria area and hopefully find Western Dwarf Squirrel. Unfortunately, the rain set in very quickly and heavily and the outing was abandoned.

In the evening, we had a nocturnal wander around the grounds. The **Orange Nectar Bats** were using the hummingbird feeders again.

Tue 12 Nov

We were leaving today, so only had time for a brief bit of birding / mammaling in the grounds of the Lodge. A **Central American Agouti** gleaning titbits from around the compost heap, and a **Red-tailed Squirrel** on the bird table were the only mammals.

We were then taken to Tocumen airport on a mostly uneventful minibus journey, and made our way home via Miami and Heathrow airports.

Hits and Misses

The Canopy Tower & Lodge guides were all excellent, especially Jorge. They speak good English and are good all-round naturalists, not just bird guides.

It would have been good to have three nights rather than two at Canopy Lodge included in the itinerary. We only had one full day there, which turned into a washout due to the rain, which meant we missed out on the chance for Western Pygmy Squirrel, but also lots of highland forest birds not seen elsewhere too. In hindsight, extending the trip by one more night would have been a good move.

Canopy Tower has limited grounds within a locked compound, so if you want to walk Semaphore Hill (whether day time or evening) you need to make sure you can get back in! There is a lot more freedom to explore at Canopy Lodge (but fewer mammals).

The afternoon in the itinerary at the Gamboa Wildlife Centre was a bit of a waste of time to us, and we wondered if it was a bit of a 'deal' that Canopy Tower had done with them to guarantee some visits / donations. For us, seeing rehabilitated sloths, whilst worthy, was only vaguely interesting and we'd rather have been staring at some trees looking for real wildlife! We also didn't bother going to the Locks as it didn't really add any extra mammal or bird opportunities for us, and chose to explore Semaphore Hill ourselves instead.

Major dips were Panamanian Night Monkey and Northern Tamadua. Steph was getting concerned we weren't looking for the night monkeys, but on hassling the guide, Jorge, it turned out he'd been checking their regular spots often, but they weren't in, which was why we'd not been taken to try for them. Missing the Tamadua was just bad luck as they are usually seen on Semaphore Hill regularly..

Overall though it was a cracking trip for our first visit to the Neotropics!

Lists of Species Seen

Mammals

26 spp identified, 25 lifers, - plus 2 possibles & 1 dead

Central American Woolly Opossum	Caluromys derbianus	
Common (Black-eared) Opossum	Didelphis marsupialis	
Nine-banded Armadillo	Dasypus novemcinctus	(non-lifer)
Hoffmann's two-toed Sloth	Choloepus hoffmanni	
Brown-throated Sloth	Bradypus variegatus	
Rothschild's Porcupine	Coendou rothschildi	(endemic)
Spotted Paca	Cuniculus paca	
Lesser Capybara	Hydrochoerus isthmius	
Central American Agouti	Dasyprocta punctata	
Rufous Tree-rat	Diplomys labilis	
Red-tailed Squirrel	Sciurus granatensis	
Variegated Squirrel	Sciurus variegatoides	
Geoffroy's Tamarin	Saguinus geoffroyi	
Panamanian White-throated Capuchin	Cebus imitator	
Mantled Howler Monkey	Alouatta palliata	
Proboscis Bat	Rhynchonycteris naso	
Greater Sac-winged/White-lined Bat	Saccopteryx bilineata	
Lesser Sac-winged/White-lined Bat	Saccopteryx leptura	
Common Big-eared Bat	Micronycteris microtis	
Spectral Bat	Vampyrum spectrum	
Orange Nectar Bat	Lonchophylla robusta	
Seba's Short-tailed Bat	Carollia perspicillata	
Common Tent-making Bat	Uroderma bilobatum	
Pallas's Mastiff Bat	Molossus molossus	
White-nosed Coati	Nasua narica	
Crab-eating Raccoon	Procyon cancrivorus	

Possibles (2 spp)

Watson's Climbing Rat?
Kinkajou?

Tylomys watsoni
Potos flavus

Dead (1 sp)

Northern tamandua

Tamandua mexicana

Resources

The Birds Panama; a Field Guide
George R. Angehr and Robert Dean
Zona Tropical (Cornell U.P.) 2010

A Field Guide to the Mammals of Central America and Southeast Mexico
Fiona A. Ried
Oxford U.P. 1997

Mammals of the Neotropics; Vol.1
John F. Eisenberg
University of Chicago Press 1989

Neotropical Rainforest Mammals; a Field Guide
Louise H. Emmons & Francois Feer
University of Chicago Press 1990

Checklist of the Birds & Mammals
Canopy Family: Carlos Bethancourt

Butterflies Canopy Lodge, Canopy Tower, Canopy Camp
Canopy Family: Faustino (Tino) Sanchez

Dragonflies & Damselflies Canopy Tower, Canopy Lodge
Canopy Family: Dennis Paulson and Dave Smallshire

Trip Reports on MammalWatching.com